

Class teaches 'ageless art' of belly dancing

Story & photo by Melanie Casey

Belly dancing instructor Michaela Lee wants to make one thing clear about her class: It has nothing to do with exotic dancing.

"A lot of people have a misconception about what we do. We're not stripping in here; we're belly dancing," she said.

'Unwind and relax'

Lee's class is part cultural lesson, part aerobics, part strength training and part dance class. And participants learn to belly dance, too (with their clothes safely on).

The class, held Wednesdays, 7 to 9 p.m., in the Patch Fitness Center, begins with a glass of tea.

"Everyone comes in stressed from work," Lee said. "[With the tea ritual] they can settle down, unwind and relax."

Afterward, participants — many of whom come to class bedecked with 'hip scarves' and other traditional attire — warm up with a routine similar to those found in most aerobic classes (albeit with colorful lightweight scarves).

The students then do some floor work designed to strengthen their abdominals, hips and arms, and then practice the basic steps of belly dancing.

The class participants and their fitness levels vary.

"We have different ages, sizes and races in here," said Lee. "The dance brings us together."

More than a fitness class

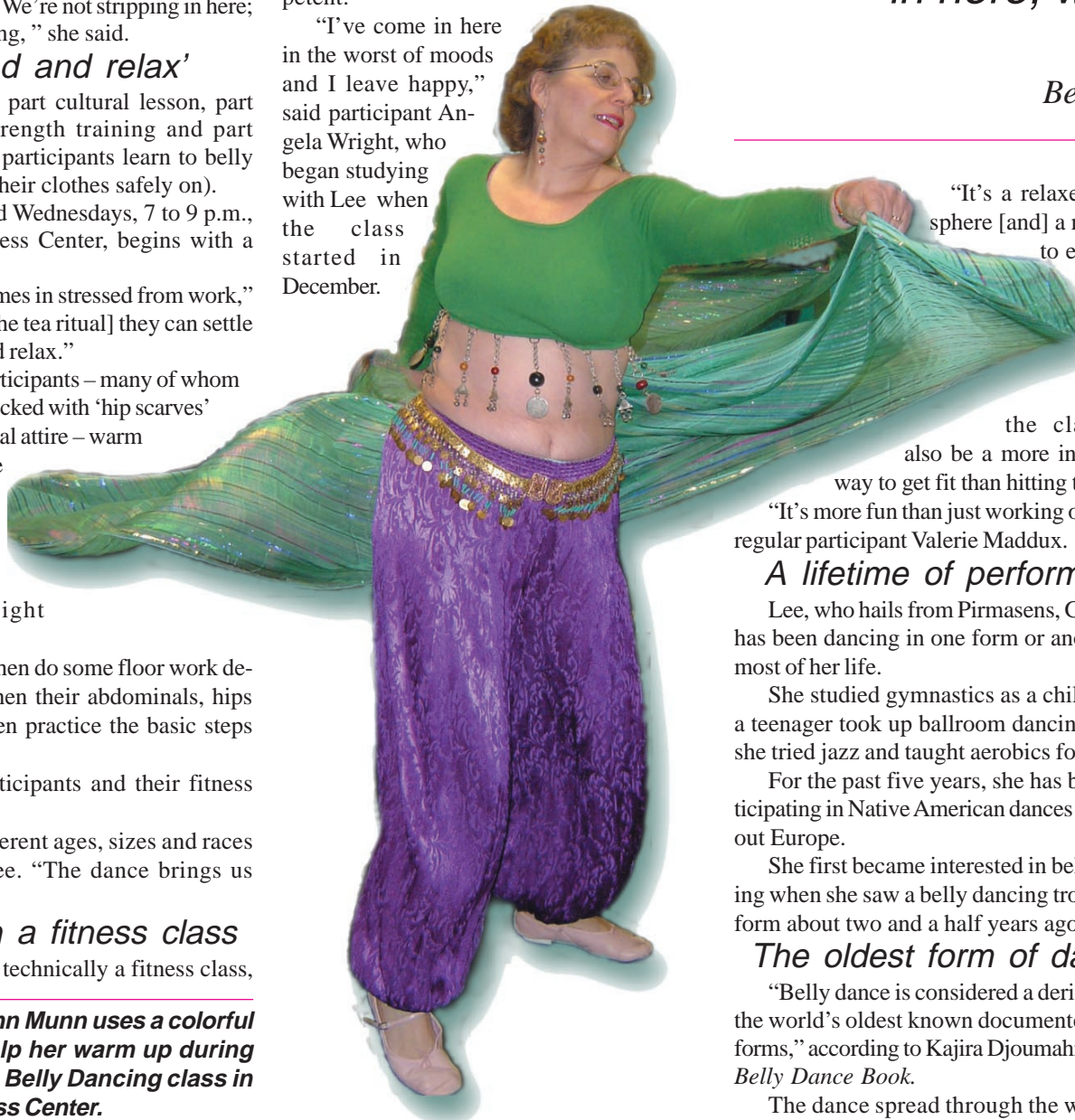
Although it is technically a fitness class,

Student Maryann Munn uses a colorful silk scarf to help her warm up during Michaela Lee's Belly Dancing class in the Patch Fitness Center.

Lee's group seems more like a club, and some of the regular participants have become friends.

"It's a good way to meet people, get exercise and relax," said student Maryann Munn. "[Lee] makes us all feel comfortable and competent."

"I've come in here in the worst of moods and I leave happy," said participant Angela Wright, who began studying with Lee when the class started in December.



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Michaela Lee

Belly dance instructor

"It's a relaxed atmosphere [and] a neat way to enjoy everyone else," she said.

Taking the class can also be a more interesting way to get fit than hitting the gym. "It's more fun than just working out," said regular participant Valerie Maddux.

A lifetime of performing

Lee, who hails from Pirmasens, Germany, has been dancing in one form or another for most of her life.

She studied gymnastics as a child and as a teenager took up ballroom dancing. Later, she tried jazz and taught aerobics for a time.

For the past five years, she has been participating in Native American dances throughout Europe.

She first became interested in belly dancing when she saw a belly dancing troupe perform about two and a half years ago.

The oldest form of dance

"Belly dance is considered a derivative of the world's oldest known documented dance forms," according to Kajira Djoumahna in *The Belly Dance Book*.

The dance spread through the world via

a group of people from northern India called Roma (whom many mistakenly call Gypsies).

The Roma traveled into Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, Egypt, Africa, Turkey, the Caucasus Mountains, Eastern Europe, Russia, Western Europe and finally Spain.

"Through all of the countries in which the Roma passed, they left some of their music and dance ... the results can be seen in folk and belly dance," Djoumahna said.

Today, she said, the dance form is "alive and well" in a variety of variations throughout the world.

Lee teaches primarily Egyptian-style belly dance, although she incorporates aspects of other belly dance styles, one of which is American Tribal Style, she said.

The class regulars are currently preparing for a performance to be held April 17 in the Patch High School Forum. New students are not obligated to perform, Lee stressed.

"My big vision is to give every woman the feeling that she can be beautiful," Lee said. "[Belly dancing] makes you happy to be a woman." (Lee did note that men are allowed to attend the class as well.)

For more information about belly dancing in Stuttgart call Lee at 0711-365-6928 or stop by the class Wednesdays, 7 to 9 p.m. The first class is free.

Group fitness classes in Stuttgart

Jazzercise

◆ Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays — 9 to 10 a.m., Patch.

◆ Mondays through Thursdays — 6 to 7 p.m., Kelley.

◆ Tuesdays and Thursdays — noon to 1 p.m., Panzer.

Yoga

◆ Tuesdays and Thursdays — 6 to 7 p.m., Patch.

Belly dancing

◆ Wednesdays — 7 to 9 p.m., Patch.

Step Extreme

◆ Mondays — 6 to 7 a.m., Patch.

Spinning

◆ Tuesdays and Thursdays — 6:45 to 7:30 a.m., Patch.

◆ Wednesdays — 5:15 to 6 p.m., Patch.

Kickboxing

◆ Mondays — 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., Patch.

◆ Wednesdays — 6 to 7 a.m., Patch.

◆ Thursdays — 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Patch.

Cardio/Sculpt

◆ Tuesdays — 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Patch.

◆ Fridays — 6 to 7 a.m., Patch.

For more information call your local fitness center.